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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000507

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FOLLOW UP TO THE CAIRO SPEECH: CONSULTATIVE
PROCESS - TUNIS

REF: TUNIS 492

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4
(b, d)

11. (C) Summary: In Tunisia, President Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo opened a window for reflection and optimism regarding US/Middle East dialogue. However, despite an enthusiastic response from Tunisian contacts and praise from senior officials, in practice we expect to see a cautious "wait-and-see" attitude. The lead-up to the upcoming October presidential elections in Tunisia, adding another term to the twenty-one year rule of President Ben Ali, has put serious discussions of the economy, corruption and human rights off the table (see Reftel). Engagement on good governance with civil society is tightly circumscribed by the Government of Tunisia (GOT), with most NGO's either adopting a risk adverse posture or having been co-opted. Tunisians are nervous regarding contact with foreign diplomats and often avoid discussion of controversial topics completely. The initiatives suggested in the Cairo speech are intrinsic to Tunisia taking the next steps to opening up the political process for more participation and to easing the restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Launching a consultative process and developing more robust programs will, no doubt, be challenging in this environment. There are still, however, priorities that appeal to the GOT and Tunisians in general: English language teaching, university partnerships, science and technology, and cultural programs. Developing initiatives in these categories, in addition to existing programs, will create the underpinning and trust to address more difficult priorities. End summary.

Consultations

12. (SBU) Embassy Tunis will engage a number of stakeholders in a dialogue on priorities as laid out by the President. We have already invited comments on our Facebook page and ambassador's blog on initiatives after Cairo. We will organize a discussion with students at our American Corner and at the summer English language village co-sponsored by Amideast and the Ministry of Higher Education, visits to NGO's that focus on women and health, and a roundtable with intellectuals. The visit of the Regional ESTH officer in July will be used to open conversations at the International Science Expo for youth. The Political Section will use their monthly roundtable with leaders in civil society, politics, academia and business to discuss these priorities.

Potential program areas

13. (SBU) English Language Teaching: GOT officials, academics and students consistently mention increasing

English language teaching. Embassy Tunis already funds a "Learn and Serve" program for twenty US university students to live and teach at the summer English Village sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education and Amideast. Almost one thousand Tunisian university students spend several weeks engaged in improving their English. This program could easily be expanded if funds are available. We also will use the FY08 ESF funds to improve the level of English for youth entering the work-force.

¶4. (SBU) Distance Education: Internet based education programs are highly sought by the GOT. The Minister of Education has called for a digital revolution in primary education. Programs like iEarn could be an answer to that call. Under MEPI, a project with the University of Georgia funded five years ago, focused on distance learning in higher education. Future university partnerships could build on this program.

¶5. (SBU) Science and Technology: A continual thread in conversations with academics and ministries in Tunisia is facilitating opportunities for research, internships and scholarships in science and technology. A US-Tunisia Science and Technology Agreement was signed in 2004 -- but was never implemented. We are working to revive the agreement and suggest that it could be leveraged to enhance cooperation in these fields.

¶6. (SBU) Economic Development: The GOT's most serious economic concern is unemployment, especially of a young, talented labor force with few job prospects. Although the GOT is seeking to increase foreign investment to fill this

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gap, they also see encouraging entrepreneurship as part of the solution. After the POTUS speech in Cairo, student groups have approached the Embassy regarding entrepreneurship initiatives. We understand that NEA is the pilot bureau for two initiatives: Education-to-Employment Opportunities (EEO) and Networks for Employment Opportunities (NEO), Tunis is an ideal post to launch such initiatives. However, we would need to have the details of what these programs represent to assess their feasibility here. FY08 ESF funds are supporting projects to provide entrepreneurship skills to recent university graduates, reform commercial laws, and improve the business climate. We could expand this to include study-to-work initiatives with internships if funding is available.

¶7. (C) Interfaith Partnerships: This is a sensitive and difficult program area for Tunisia. The GOT prides itself on good interfaith relationships and a tolerant population. At the same time, they monitor and control the dialogue regarding religion inside and outside the mosque. Muslim religious leaders are government employees with whom we cannot meet without permission, which is difficult to obtain.

¶8. (SBU) Cultural Programming: Music, dance, film, theater and art are highly popular programming tools in Tunisia. They also open informal arenas for conversation and create much goodwill. A robust schedule of performances and exhibits from the Arts America program in ECA could garner a lot of positive publicity.

Constraints

¶9. (SBU) The Tunisian context imposes external constraints on program initiatives. The GOT often intervenes to block programs with which it does not agree, and imposes requirements that have the effect of preventing forward movement, including the forcing of last minute cancellations after funds have already been expended. Limited staffing and funds impose internal constraints as well. For over eight years, we have requested increased Public Affairs staffing in

the Mission Strategic Plan (MSP) to handle burgeoning scholarship and exchange programs. For the last two years, we have had a part time alumni coordinator funded by ECA. This coordinator position should be made permanent in order to not lose the good-will of our alumni and the magnifier effect of their engagement. Every program also has costs in advertising, in-country travel, and other logistics. Any increase in exchanges or cultural initiatives can only occur if accompanied by a plus-up in budgets (see reftel).

Comments

¶10. (C) Embassy Tunis appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation of the President's initiatives. Each country and region have their particular circumstances that will contribute to the choices of the eventual "menu" of possibilities. In Tunisia, options will be circumscribed by political sensitivities, fear of risk-taking by host country nationals, and tight government control of civil society. Within these constraints, and with appropriate resources, there is still much we can accomplish.

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